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The Power of Form in Henry Medwall's *Fulgens and Luces*

VANESSA GERRING

Philip Sidney offers in his *Defence of Poesie* that “neither philosopher nor historiographer could at the first have entered into the gates of popular judgements, if they had not taken a great passport of poetry” (Sidney 138). It is the author who is able to provide a true *dulce et decorum* experience by using his creative license to intertwine otherwise dry or controversial content with rich and golden form to produce a piece that at the very least will both instruct and delight, yet hold the power to take its audience to the forefront of a social reform movement. Through his patronage at Cardinal Morton’s residence and his careful literary wit, playwright Henry Medwall was able to challenge the nature of the aristocratic class in the audience of his interlude, *Fulgens and Luces*. Medwall uses his interlude as a tool to forward the mission of Renaissance humanists to create an ideal society.

Medwall was 24 years old when Henry VII took control in 1485. Records kept by Eton College and recovered by Alan H. Nelson age the playwright at 12 at his festival day when he was named the king’s scholar on August 1, 1474. Given that the festival day is “the ecclesiastical festival nearest to the scholar’s actual day of birth” (Nelson, “The Plays” 163), Medwall’s date of birth is on or about September 8, 1461 (Nelson, “Life Records” 111). Little else is known of Henry Medwall’s life, short of the records kept by the colleges and legal documents.

Biographers have established that Medwall was a native of Southwark, a suburb of London that housed the infamous Bankside stews. He attended Eton College from 1475 to 1480 and was subsequently educated at King’s College in Cambridge until June 13, 1483. Interestingly, Medwall’s departure from the college coincided

with John Morton’s arrest by the future King Richard III. This is an early indication of Morton and Medwall’s relationship. In August 1485, King Richard III was overthrown by Henry VII, and the new king began reinventing his court with what are known as the “new men.” They included Morton, who was appointed Lord Chancellor in March 1486 and then Archbishop of Canterbury in October of the same year. Medwall was appointed by Morton to serve as a public notary in his archiepiscopal palace at Lambeth and was ordained to minor orders in 1490 (Nelson, “Life Records” 111). Marked as a promising youth from Southwark, Medwall rose through patronage of the Tudor society.

Within a span of nine years, Medwall saw John Morton rise from Bishop of Ely to Cardinal, the position he maintained until his death on October 12, 1500. As advisor to the crown and elector of the pope, the Cardinal directly influenced the community he served. Values are passed from the highest class to the commoners through a trickle-down education system. A secular form of the Great Chain of Being, so to speak, begins with the king, followed by the nobility and church, the aristocracy, middle class, gentry, and peasants. Medwall uses the form of the interlude to illuminate the debate on the definition of nobility to his target audience. The mission of *Fulgens and Luces* is to insert humanist ideals into the minds of the influential class of people in the audience who, by the slightest grin of endorsement of a concept, could heedlessly render public approval of it.

Humanists were commonly referred to as arrivistes (Watkins 775). The term “new men” was used by David Bevington to describe the shift in ideals represented by the members of the new Tudor Court. Not unlike Medwall, whose family background lies in the cloth trade (Nelson, “The Plays” 4), the “new men” attempted to veil their social upbringing with emphasis on their more noble positions. In order to present themselves as equal to the aristocracy, the arrivistes “acquired vast holdings in land.” Still, they “had a special interest in the doctrines of humanism, and commissioned humanist writers to create a rationale for the new Tudor society” (Bevington 44). The natural nobility was not completely ignored, however. Bevington

describes a “novel emphasis on professional ability, literary training, and the innate qualities of ‘gentillesse’ that might be found in untitled men as well as in nobility” (44). Medwall was brought into the Tudor world by way of the King’s concern to populate the class with men who could provide more than a familial title to the Court. Medwall’s patronage in Morton’s residence gave him direct experience with the aristocratic class. It allowed him to witness the sinful behavior of those who were supposed to be virtuous leaders and fueled his desire to incite change.

Henry VII’s household was the “first English court to offer widespread and systematic patronage to artists and men of letters” (Kipling 118), and Henry’s patronage of drama was crucial in the development of the interlude (149). Unfortunately, his tastes inevitably alienated arrivistes, as he preferred “rhetoricians to poets [and] propagandists to humanists,” pushing the reformational mindset of these men to the side in favor of those who talk the House up to his standard (118). Medwall would have gotten a feel for what the aristocratic class valued through his employment with Morton as notary, where his main task was to serve as a witness to legal filings and documents. He would have also been familiar with “Morton’s Fork,” which was a sophisticated tax collection scheme to extort money for the crown. Imposed by Henry’s tax commissioners, “Morton’s Fork” promised the rich that they could afford to contribute and accused the poor of concealing wealth (John Morton). With corruption all around, Medwall must have concluded that the simple label of nobility does not denote a noble human being. Medwall sought to highlight desirable qualities that those who held positions of power should embody if their mission was truly to create a better society under their rule.

Following the humanist goal of creating the ideal society, Medwall had to be careful in his delivery of this challenging topic to the high class of Morton and his company. Much depended on his personal charm. Morton’s personality is described by Thomas More, who served at his Lambeth Palace as a page in 1490-1492 (Nelson, “The Plays” 17). More cleverly places this description in the mouth of Raphael during his digression about the problems with social class

systems in Utopia. Raphael explains the issue of speaking freely in the Palace as he tells the Thomas More character,

Anyway, the conversation seemed worth repeating, if only in a general outline, so as to give you some idea of the way these people think. You see, everything said was treated with contempt, until it appeared that the Cardinal was not against it -- and then they were immediately all for it. In their efforts to flatter him, they were even prepared to applaud, and almost take seriously the suggestions made by a hanger-on of his, simply because the great man laughingly approved of them. So you can guess how much notice people would take of me and my advice at Court! (35)

Medwall operates on his patronage with Morton to plant ideas in his audience’s mind with the purpose of these transformational concepts sneaking into conversation with some of the most powerful people in England. From there, they would hopefully be considered seriously.

Medwall wrote plays during his time with Cardinal Morton, who achieved his new title in 1493. The two Medwall plays that have been recovered are the interludes *Nature and Fulgens and Lucres*. Both were performed at Lambeth Palace for entertainment as Cardinal Morton and his company of “new men” and “old men” sat in the Great Hall of the Palace. Interludes were often presented during glorious banquets in the Christmas season. Alan Nelson argues that Part I of *Fulgens and Lucres* was presented during a mid-day meal, and Part II was to be performed during an evening meal. The audience consisted of “noblemen, ecclesiasts, lawyers, and married women” (Nelson, “The Plays” 18-9). A mixture of men who gained their status through merit and men who furthered the name of their noble heritage was to be found seated in the audience of these interludes. As a notary, Medwall knew how to relate to this aristocratic class, but any question he posed about their actions--or lack of--would have been treated with contempt, similar to what More describes.

To suggest that virtue is not conferred by birth would be appalling to the men and women who led their lives based on the notion that their amassed wealth was evidence of their favor from

God. Medwall needed to be cautious in his delivery of this focus on integrity in high society. An instructional interlude disguised as entertainment for the guiding voice of the ruler of England is the vehicle required to propel the humanistic vision through the trickle-down education system. *Fulgens and Lucres* includes the right balance of time, place, and humor to accomplish this while keeping Medwall in good stead with Morton and his aristocratic colleagues.

The story of *Fulgens and Lucres* originated in an Italian play called *De Vera Nobilitate* (1428) by Buonaccorso. *Fulgens and Lucres* concerns two suitors courting a Roman senator's daughter. One of the suitors is of noble descent and the other is of a lesser class, yet he is the one chosen by Lucres for his virtue. Simultaneously, two servants seek employment by the men and compete humorously for the hand of Lucres' maid. The issue of whether nobility derived from birth or merit was not original to Henry VII's court but it was increasingly relevant as he continued to call a rising number of "new men" into positions of high rank (Norland 234). The central debate of the interlude centers on the status of the "old men" in the audience, peers of the Cardinal who may not have prescribed to the humanist message of virtue by merit and thus hindering the efforts of social reformists.

The audience is placed in the setting of classical Rome where a more specific variety of criticism could be raised without an immediate correlation to the present England. The language of law is peppered throughout to appeal to the audience. The Cardinal began his career as a lawyer, so a structured debate with a deciding party would have been a situation that he was accustomed to (Norland 234). Medwall is aware that legal terms such as "precedent" (line 432), "sentence" (435), "evidence" (728), "case" (737), and the fact that Lucres waits for both parties to be present, would earmark the subject matter as meaningful, and the language he gives to his characters reflects his authorial design. Medwall hooks the aristocrats and strings them through the entirety of a didactic episode before the noblemen could know what had been done to them. It is not until the conclusion of the interlude that the audience is made aware of Medwall's intention. He has a servant character close with:

That all the substaunce of this play
Was done specially therfor
Not onely to make myrth and game,
But that suche as be gentilmen of name
May be somewhat movyd
By this example for to eschew
The wey of vyce, and favour vertue.
For syn is to be reprovyd
More in them, for the degre,
Than in other parsons such as be
Of pour kyn and birth. (888-898)

The interlude is specifically crafted for the purpose of persuading the nobility to consume the humanist interest of a new class of leaders. Those whose gleaming virtue is derived from performing good deeds in the community, with the objective of improving life on earth, were desirable. Renaissance humanists hoped to rid the Court of leaders with the effortless label of "noble" given by chance of birth in the lineage of their name.

Two very different definitions of nobility from the suitors leave Lucres to use her rational faculty to make the decision of who the nobler of the two is. Cornelius defines his nobility as the ability to "spend all your dayes in ease and pleasaunt idelnesse" (549) with "riches ... At your will ever more" (547). He claims that his ancestors have "Delyverd this cyte from dedely parell" though it was done so through the means of murder and theft (466). Gaius, the humbler man, counters that they are both born of God: "That both he and I cam of Adam and Eve. / There is no difference that I can tell" (665-66). He has devoted his life to God, has been loving to his friends and family, and spends his time studying so that his hands will not be idle. He continues that he can afford Lucres "moderate riches, / And that sufficient for us both doutles" (696-7). He cites Corneilius' actions as having no "proffitte, no more do ye, / To the comon wele of this noble cytie" (618-9). Lucres chooses Gaius, the commoner, for the very specific reason:

That a man of excellent virtuous condicions,
 Although he be of a pore stoke bore,
 Yet I wyll honour and commende hym more
 Than one that is descendide of right noble kyn
 Whose lyffe is all dissolute and rotyde in syn. (789-93)

Though Lucrez declares Gaius as the better man, she is careful to proclaim that she will “not dispise / The blode of Cornelius ... But unto the blode [she] wyll have lytyl respect / Where tho condicyons be synfull and abiect” (759-65). Medwall is turning the mirror to his audience. Hearing the justification for selecting a mate and future head of a family forces the audience to consider their own actions. Without suggesting an outright disdain for the lazy nobles, her rejection of them is outspoken, and provides grounds for further acceptance of the Gaius-type.

Medwall pairs his characters’ spoken words with a specific rhyme scheme that denotes their social class standing. Fulgens, Lucrez, and the suitors Cornelius and Gaius speak in rime royal (the seven-line, iambic pentameter, ababbcc-rhymed stanza used by Chaucer in *Troilus and Criseyde*). Rime royal identifies its speakers as dignified and the narrative as serious. The comic servant figures speak in tail-rhyme, which features longer stanzas of shorter lines (with a scheme of aaabcccb with the a- and c- lines typically tetrameter and the b-lines, or the tail, trimeter). The different rhyme patterns establish alternate poetic and moral domains (Cartwright 40-1). People in the Renaissance had a keener ear for the cadence of language than we do today; they would have immediately recognized this change in rhyme as it was being performed and inherently understood the representational meaning of that shift.

As the moral domain shifts, the characters shift from being members of the residence to servers on the stage. “A” and “B,” placeholder character names meant to be filled by players in the audience, pass from the “real world” to the “stage world” and bring the audience with them when they do so. With the ease of this transition, the servant characters demonstrate to an aristocratic audience that the risky notion of a society where men of merit come

into power is accessible and quite easy to obtain (Jones 131). The servant subplot also provides comic relief to the risky main plot. The subplot frames the Roman story and distances the aristocratic audience through “mirth and game” (890). Some of the comedy that A and B use can be found at lines 178-205, where Corneilius sends his servant B to remind Lucrez of the noble time when he saved her from a cuckoo bird by throwing her “musk ball,” which is an expensive container of perfume, at the bird. Then about 100 lines later, the servant gets the story mixed up and “reminds” Lucrez about the time that either she “kyst hym on the noke of the arse” or he kissed her (283). We also see A poke fun at the seriousness of the topic at line 842 when he asks, “Vertue, what the devyll is that?” Medwall has Lucrez declare that she will set no precedent and speaks only for herself as another attempt to keep potential outrage over her choice at bay (Cartwright 42). At the very end of the interlude, the servant speaks to the audience, and relieves Medwall of any wrong doing by making a joke about him when he says,

At the lest ye will take it in pacience.
 And yf therebe ony offence --
 Show us where in or we go hence --
 Done in the same,
 It is only for lack of connyng,
 And not he, but his wit runnyng
 Is there of to blame (908-14)

“B” blames Medwall’s lack of skill and crazy mind for the substance of the play so the audience should not take any offense by it. Medwall was able to maintain his position in the Cardinal’s residence for some time after Fulgens and Lucrez was performed, although his infusion of humanist principles in his interludes marked him as a threat to the “old men” of the noble class.

Medwall was protected by his relationship with the Cardinal. Just four months after the Cardinal’s death, the Prior of Christchurch Canterbury filed suit against Medwall for the recovery of the archiepiscopal documents from his time at Lambeth. Records show letters of protection from arrest for one year, followed by his “voluntary resignation” in June 1501 (Nelson, “The Plays” 168).

Medwall then seems to disappear, perhaps by fleeing to another country, or by death. It is clear that he was targeted by enemies of the Cardinal.

As one of the most powerful men in late 14th century, Cardinal Morton was a crucial factor in Henry Medwall's ability to present his *Fulgens and Lucres*. Medwall employed the form of the interlude as an intentional mask for the humanist agenda of replacing "old men" with "new men." *Lucres* is given the opportunity to use her rational faculty to choose a noble suitor to take her hand. This is a humanist value. The push for the redefinition of nobility as one who does good deeds and is of good heart rather than of noble decent illustrates the humanist movement to create the ideal society, one with good people due to virtuous actions. Medwall dramatizes the humanist concept that choices and actions lead to virtue, not the social class into which a person was born. In order to create the ideal society you need to act, not just be.

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